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The Origin of Christian Baptism

by

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I. The Baptism of John

Since the late nineteenth century, students of the New Testament have recognized that the history of early Christianity begins in an important sense with John the Baptist.¹ However much Jesus may have differed from John in lifestyle and teaching, the fact that he was baptized by John suggests that the Jesus movement had its roots in the activity of John. All four gospels begin the account of Jesus' public life with his baptism; the point is most vividly dramatized in Mark and is made explicit in Acts 1:21-22: the one to replace Judas among the Twelve had to be one who had been with them 'beginning from the baptism of John until the day when [Jesus] was taken up from us'.² I would suggest that Christian baptism also had its origin in the baptism performed by John.

In order to understand the origins of Christian baptism, therefore, it is important to understand the nature of the baptism performed by John. The primary sources for the reconstruction of the historical John the Baptist are the synoptic sayings source (Q) that is recoverable through a comparison of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the four canonical gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke and John), the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and Josephus.³ Josephus discusses John the Baptist in book 18 of the *Antiquities of the Jews*. The most important part of the account is as follows:

...he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour. When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to

wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake.⁴

This passage is authentic, since it displays no Christian tendencies and adheres with Josephus' usual content and style. Its reliability is qualified by Josephus' well known biases, namely, that he consistently avoided any mention of Jewish eschatology and that he attempted to present Jewish ideas and practices in as clear and rational a manner as possible and in Greco-Roman terms, often philosophical terms. The first bias is clearly at work here. In stark contrast to the Christian texts, Josephus makes no mention of John's orientation to the future.⁵ The reasons given for Herod's execution of John may reveal indirectly the political effect of John's eschatological teaching. The second bias may be behind Josephus' emphasis that the ablution was not meant to be effective in itself. This emphasis could be a distortion meant to impress Josephus' enlightened and skeptical Gentile readers, his own importing into his understanding of John ideas foreign to John himself, or a rationalizing understanding of John's teaching that the ritual required appropriate preparation and disposition.

The passage from Acts that presents the baptism of John as the beginning of Jesus' public life has already been cited (1:21-22). The bias of the book of Acts on this issue comes through most clearly in its repeated contrast between the baptism of John with *water* and the baptism through Christ with *spirit*.⁶ In a speech of Paul, Acts describes John as one who 'preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel' (13:24). This brief description is compatible with Josephus' account and is probably reliable. It is embedded, however, in a context which portrays John as the forerunner of Christ (Acts 13:23-25).

The idea that John consciously prepared the way for Jesus the Messiah is a typical Christian bias and is probably not historical. This Christian interpretation of the significance of John is present already in the oldest narrative gospel, Mark, in the announcement placed in John's mouth, 'After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mark 1:7-8). The gospel of Matthew minimizes the authority of John by having him demur at baptizing Jesus (Matt. 3:14). Luke refrains from describing the actual baptism of Jesus by John, presumably for a similar reason. In the gospel of John, the Baptist's role as the forerunner of Christ is elaborated and his inferiority to him is emphasized (John 1:6-8, 19-37, cf. 3:22-30, 4:1-3).⁷

The synoptic sayings source (Q), which is probably as old as and independent of Mark, also included a saying in which John identifies himself as a forerunner.⁸ According to this form of the saying, the one who comes after John, the mightier one, will baptize not only with holy spirit, but also with fire. To this saying is added another: 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (Luke 3:17; cf. Matt. 3:12).

Behind the Christian picture of John pointing ahead to Jesus the Messiah there may well be a historically accurate tradition that John presented himself as a forerunner. Rather than a human messiah, however, it is likely that John spoke of a direct divine intervention.⁹ Support for this hypothesis lies in several considerations. The gospel of Mark (1:2-3) quotes Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3 and implies that John the Baptist is the messenger spoken of and Jesus is the Lord who is coming. If John the Baptist alluded to Scriptures like these, he probably interpreted the Coming One as God, an interpretation which is closer to the original sense than the Christian reading. Jewish texts written relatively close to the time and place of John's activity make plausible the hypothesis that he used imagery of spirit and fire for the future activity of God. According to the Community Rule from Qumran:

at the time of the visitation...God will then purify every deed of man with his truth; he will refine for himself the human frame by rooting out all spirit of falsehood from the bounds of his flesh. He will cleanse him of all wicked deeds with the *spirit* of holiness; like purifying waters he will shed upon him the *spirit* of truth....¹⁰

Book 4 of the Sibylline Oracles was composed by a Jewish writer around 80 C.E.¹¹ Its call for righteousness and its eschatological perspective are similar to the message of John the Baptist as it can be reconstructed from the accounts of Josephus, Acts, Mark, and Q. Divine punishment by fire plays an important role in this work. A climactic passage reads:

But when faith in piety perishes from among men, and justice is hidden in the world, untrustworthy men, living for unholy deeds, will commit outrage, wicked and evil deeds.

No one will take account of the pious, but they will even destroy them all, by foolishness, very infantile people, rejoicing in outrages and applying their hands to blood.

Even then know that God is no longer benign but gnashing his teeth in wrath and destroying the entire race of men at once by a great conflagration.

Ah, wretched mortals, change these things, and do not lead the great God to all sorts of anger, but abandon daggers and groanings, murders and outrages, and wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers.

Stretch out your hands to heaven and ask forgiveness for your previous deeds and make propitiation for bitter impiety with words of praise; God will grant repentance and will not destroy. He will stop his wrath again if you all practice honourable piety in your hearts. But if you do not obey me, evil-minded ones, but love impiety, and receive all these things with evil ears, there will be fire throughout the whole world, and a very great sign with sword and trumpet at the rising of the sun.¹²

The Q-saying preserved in Matt. 3:11-12 and Luke 3:16-17, that describes metaphorically judgment to be executed by the Coming One with spirit and fire, may therefore be a Christian application to Jesus of a saying spoken by John with reference to divine judgment.

The question of the origin of the baptism of John has been disputed. One theory is that it was based on the ritual ablutions at Qumran. Some scholars have argued that the Qumran community required a ritual immersion connected with initiation into the community, i.e., a baptism.¹³ One form of this hypothesis is based on a passage in the Community Rule declaring that any hypocritical member of the congregation could not be cleansed by any ablution (1QS 3:4-9).¹⁴ The argument is that this text is in proximity with the description of the ceremony of entry into the covenant community (1:16-2:18) and that it precedes the instruction on the two spirits that may have been part of the instruction given to members about to be initiated. The problems with this view are that no immersion is mentioned as part of the ceremony and the ablutions referred to are the repeated ritual washings practised by the group. Another passage used to support this view is the remark that the men of falsehood shall not enter the water to partake of the pure meal of the saints, i.e., the members of the community.¹⁵ This passage, however, more likely refers to the daily immersion of full members of the community before the main meal that was eaten in a state of ritual purity. The ablutions at Qumran then did not include an initiatory baptism. Rather, they were Levitical washings related to ritual purity.¹⁶ Admission to the regular ablutions and the meal

symbolized the conviction that those admitted were pure and free of sin and were living in a holy manner and thus widely separated from sinful and impure people.

The baptism of John did have certain similarities to the ritual washings at Qumran: both involved withdrawal to the desert to await the Lord; both were linked to an ascetic lifestyle; both included total immersion in water; and both had an eschatological context. These features, however, were not unique to John and the community at Qumran.¹⁷ The differences are at least equally striking; a priestly, exclusive community versus the activity of a prophetic, charismatic leader in a public situation;¹⁸ a ritual practised at least once daily versus an apparently once and for all ritual; and a self-enacted ritual versus a ritual administered by John.

Proselyte Baptism

If the ritual washings at Qumran do not provide a credible context for the origin of the baptism of John, perhaps proselyte baptism provides the key. There are certain important similarities. Proselyte baptism is at least witnessed and may be understood as administered. It is a once and for all ritual understood as a sign of an inner transformation. If the practice of proselyte baptism is older than the time of John, his baptism may be understood as a reinterpretation of that ritual. For example, his intention may have been to signify that the whole Jewish people had become like the Gentiles; since they were apostates from the covenant, they too were unclean.¹⁹ John's baptism thus meant a reentry into the covenant relationship or an initiation into an eschatological community, prepared for the visitation of the Lord.

If, however, proselyte baptism originated later than John, it cannot be the source of meaning of his baptism. The date of the origin of proselyte baptism has been much discussed. The issue is complex, because the notion and practice of proselyte baptism seem to have evolved gradually, rather than been instituted *de novo* at a particular point in time. The discussion has been confused because of a lack of clarity over what is being talked about. A major root of this confusion is the fact that, in the rabbinical writings, the noun *tebilah* is used in two ways: to mean the ordinary ritual bath and the immersion that was part of the initiation of proselytes. The problem is how to determine when the second meaning is present. If the notion and ritual of proselyte baptism evolved gradually, one must distinguish between the first ordinary ritual ablution of a convert to Judaism and an immersion that is part of an initiation ceremony. One important

criterion is that proselyte baptism is present only when the ritual is administered or at least witnessed.

There have been three major theories in the literature about the origin of proselyte baptism. Gedalyahu Alon represents the position with the earliest date for the ritual. He has argued that the immersion of proselytes goes back to the early Second Temple period. The purpose was to remove the uncleanness of the Gentiles that derives from idols.²⁰

The second major view, held by Israel Abrahams, H. H. Rowley, Joachim Jeremias, and Lawrence Schiffman, is that proselyte baptism was a widespread practice at least prior to John the Baptist.²¹ Jeremias stated that the older Jewish view was that the priestly purity laws were not binding on Gentiles. Therefore, only circumcision was necessary for the proselyte. This view was still dominant in the second century B.C.E., as Judith 14:10 shows. When Achior joined the house of Israel, he was circumcised, but no mention is made of baptism. Jeremias suggested that the newer view arose in the first century B.C.E., namely, that all Gentile women were impure because they did not purify themselves after menstruation. Therefore, all Gentile men were also impure because of their contact with Gentile women. To support this hypothesis, Jeremias pointed to a text in the Testament of Levi, part of the patriarch's speech to his children, the beginning of the priestly line of the nation:

with harlots and adulteresses will you be joined, and the daughters of the Gentiles shall you take to wife, *purifying them with unlawful purifications*; and your union shall be like unto Sodom and Gomorrah (T. Levi 14:6).²²

Jeremias also pointed to rabbinic texts in support of his view.²³

In his treatment of the issue, Lawrence Schiffman admitted that there is no definite attestation of immersion for conversion before the early Yavnean period.²⁴ Nevertheless, he concluded that it is necessary to date the Jewish ritual prior to John the Baptist in order to explain his baptism and that of the early Christians.²⁵

The third major theory is that proselyte baptism developed in Judaism in the second half of the first century or in the second century C.E. Among those holding this position are Charles Scobie and S. Zeitlin.²⁶ The studies of A. Büchler have suggested to some that the immersion of proselytes was instituted in about 65 C.E. with the enactment of the eighth decrees, one of which declared (for the first time) that Gentiles were intrinsically unclean. Büchler viewed this decree as a precautionary measure against Roman sodomy.²⁷ Scobie argued that the rabbinic texts

regarding proselytes which are early have no explicit allusion to immersion as part of the initiation ceremony. The rabbinic texts which speak explicitly of such an immersion date to the late first or early second century C.E. He suggested that, after the destruction of the temple, the ritual of immersion could have risen in importance as the only available ritual for female proselytes.

All modern scholars who have addressed the subject agree that there is no proselyte baptism in the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament. With regard to Alon's theory, it is possible that some proselytes observed ritual washings in the early Second Temple period. In some cases, the first ablution may have been thought to counteract impurity contracted by Gentile life. But there is no evidence that such ablutions, if they occurred, were 'baptisms', since there is no reliable evidence that they were tied to an initiation rite, administered, or performed in the presence of witnesses.

Jeremias' appeal to the Testament of Levi does not demonstrate that proselyte baptism was instituted in the first century B.C.E. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is virtually impossible to date. It is not even certain that the document was originally Jewish, since its present form is Christian. Further the comment about 'purifying them with an unlawful purification' is not a certain allusion to proselyte baptism.

In the proselytizing of the Maccabean period, admission to Israel was always simply by circumcision, according to the evidence.²⁸ Furthermore, Philo often speaks of proselytes, but never mentions proselyte baptism. Josephus discusses the admission of proselytes, but mentions circumcision only. The rabbinic texts cited by Jeremias which relate to the Passover contain no indication that the immersion mentioned was part of a ceremony of initiation.²⁹

The oldest clear reference to proselyte baptism is in the Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 46a. The relevant passage begins with the question of the status of children conceived by Jewish women from proselytes who had been circumcised but had not performed the required ablution. If the fathers were proper proselytes, the children were Jews, if the fathers were not proper proselytes, the fathers were idolators and the children bastards. In the course of the discussion, the opinions of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah are cited. These two rabbis apparently belonged to the second generation of the Tannaim, active from about 90 to 130 C.E.³⁰ Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as teaching that a proselyte who was circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution was a proper proselyte. Rabbi Joshua is said to have taught that a proselyte who had performed the prescribed ablution but had not been circum-

cised was a proper proselyte. This tradition is evidence, at most, that around the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, proselyte baptism was beginning to be recognized as an essential part of the initiation into Judaism, but was not yet recognized as such by all authorities.³¹

A saying of Epictetus, preserved by Arrian, implies that baptism was an essential part of the process of conversion to Judaism.³² Some scholars have argued that Epictetus is referring here to Christians and not to Jews.³³ Menahem Stern argues that the philosopher was indeed referring to Jews. Following Fergus Millar, he places this discourse at Nicopolis and dates it to about 108 C.E. Even if Stern is correct, this bit of evidence does not support the emergence of proselyte baptism before the end of the first or the beginning of the second century.

The Origin of John's Baptism

Schiffman's argument that proselyte baptism must be dated before John the Baptist in order to explain his baptism and that of the early Christians is unwarranted. Only two elements have a firm claim for consideration on the question of the origin of the baptism of John. Without these two elements, this baptism would be unintelligible. One of these is the tradition and practice of Levitical ablutions. This ritual is the ultimate source of the form of John's ritual which apparently involved total immersion in water. The other element is the prophetic-apocalyptic tradition.³⁴ One aspect of this tradition important for John's baptism was the expectation of a future, definitive intervention of God. Another significant aspect was the ethical use of ablution imagery. For example, Isaiah 1:16-17 exhorts the people:

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, correct oppression;
defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.³⁵

In some texts, such as Ezekiel 36:25-28, ablution imagery was used both ethically and eschatologically. God's transformation of the people in the eschatological restoration was to involve a new spirit and a new heart. This new creation was to begin with a divine sprinkling of clean water upon the people to cleanse them from their sins and acts of idolatry. The tradition of prophetic symbolic actions may have played a role. The baptism of John may have been intended to signify God's approach as purifier before the promised judgment and transformation. As has already been

noted, ritual ablutions were growing in importance in John's time. This development is attested by the literature from Qumran, the traditions about the Pharisees and about meal-associates, and traditions about ascetic individuals, like Bannos, the teacher of Josephus. The tradition of the prophetic symbolic action and the growing importance of ritual ablutions were contributing factors in making John a baptizer rather than simply a preacher or oracular prophet.³⁶ The significance of John's baptism is best understood in terms of a prophetic reinterpretation of the sense of defilement in ethical terms and an apocalyptic expectation of judgment.

II. Jesus and Baptism

One of the few strong points of consensus on the historical Jesus is that he was baptized by John. The fact that Jesus sought baptism by John is evidence that Jesus recognized the authority of John as an agent of God. The Synoptic tradition reflects that recognition on the part of Jesus, in spite of its subordination of John to Jesus.³⁷ Presumably, Jesus, by accepting the baptism of John, accepted its prophetic-eschatological significance. Many students of the New Testament conclude that Jesus' eschatology was more orientated to the present time of fulfilment than to the future consummation.³⁸

The relationship between the activity of John and that of Jesus is portrayed differently in the Synoptics than in the gospel of John. According to Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus' activity of teaching and healing began only after John was arrested.³⁹ There is no indication in these gospels that either Jesus or his disciples baptized during the life of the historical Jesus.⁴⁰ The gospel of John describes Jesus' public activity as overlapping with John's.⁴¹ It differs from the Synoptics also in stating (three times) that Jesus was baptizing many people.⁴² These statements, however, are corrected, perhaps by a later hand, with a parenthetical remark that Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples.⁴³

Whether the Synoptics or John present the historically more reliable picture has been disputed. One theory is that the picture of the gospel of John is unreliable, because it is a literary composition reflecting rivalry between the followers of John the Baptist and those of Jesus at the time the gospel was written.⁴⁴ Another point of view is that the gospel of John is more accurate than the Synoptics on this point, because there is no plausible theological reason why the tradition that Jesus and his disciples once baptized would be invented. The practice of Christian baptism did not need such support. If there were followers of the Baptist around who

ivalled the Christians for whom the gospel was written, the information that Jesus had imitated John would provide them with ammunition against the independence and authority of Jesus.⁴⁵ A further argument in favour of the reliability of the gospel of John is that the report of Jesus' baptizing creates a problem for the evangelist. In 1:33 Jesus was presented as the one who baptizes with holy spirit. But the description in chapters 3-4 does not imply that Jesus' baptism was different in kind from John's. According to 7:39, the spirit is given only after Jesus' 'exaltation'. The appropriate conclusion seems to be that the gospel of John is historically accurate on this point and that the authors of the other gospels were unaware of, or suppressed, the tradition that Jesus baptized.

If Jesus administered baptism of a kind similar to John's, one would expect continuity between the baptism of John and early Christian baptism. The discontinuity is as great as the continuity in the cases of the gospel of Matthew and the letters of Paul, but there is striking continuity between John's baptism and the baptism to which Peter invited the Jews assembled in Jerusalem on Pentecost according to the second chapter of Acts.

III. Christian Baptism

The origin of Christian baptism has been disputed. The traditional view, of course, is that the practice of baptism in the early Church was the result of the command of the risen Lord as reported in the gospel of Matthew (28:16-20). There are problems with the assumption that this passage is authentic.⁴⁶ Even if the passage is assumed to be authentic, it is still necessary to place the command in a context, to ask what the early Christians understood themselves to be doing.

Students of the New Testament who assume that Jesus did not baptize have usually taken one of three basic positions. Some have hypothesized that the early Christians reverted to the baptism of John and reinterpreted it.⁴⁷ Others have argued that the metaphor of baptism in the spirit in the teaching of John gave rise to a baptismal ritual associated with the gift of the spirit. Many have taken the position that the early Church simply borrowed the ritual of proselyte baptism from the Jews. Another possibility is that there was an unbroken continuity from the baptism of John, through the baptism associated with the activity of Jesus, to the baptism practised by the early Christians. The first fundamental change occurred in the context of the Gentile mission under the increasing influence of Hellenistic culture.

1. *Baptism in Acts 2*

The assumption of unbroken continuity has two main advantages. It explains why the 120 or so persons referred to in Acts 1:15 are not said to have undergone any particularly Christian baptismal ritual. It also explains why the basic function of baptism as reflected in Peter's Pentecost sermon is so similar to the baptism of John. New elements are added, but the starting point is the same.⁴⁸

Peter calls for repentance, just as John is said to have done.⁴⁹ Peter indicates that the baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. The same association is made in Mark and Matthew.⁵⁰ Peter exhorts his Jewish audience, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' Their response is to submit to baptism.⁵¹ According to Matthew, going to John for baptism was a means of fleeing from 'the wrath to come' (Matt.3:7). The images of trees being cut down and thrown into the fire and of chaff being burned in unquenchable fire also point to a coming judgment.⁵² Thus, on the most basic level, the meaning of the ritual of baptism in Acts 2 is similar to that of John the Baptist and to the ablutions called for in the fourth Sibylline Oracle: wrath is coming on this evil generation; members of this generation may be saved by repenting and receiving baptism; this baptism is a metaphorical cleansing so that the fire of judgment will, at worst, further refine and not destroy.⁵³

There are two new elements in the function and meaning of baptism in Acts 2. One is that baptism occurs 'in the name (*epi tō onomati*) of Jesus Christ' (v.38). There has been a debate over the origin of this phrase. Albrecht Oepke, following A. Deissmann, argued that it has a Greek origin and that the phrase *eis to onoma*⁵⁴ was a technical term in commerce. The literal meaning was 'to the account of'.⁵⁵ Here the metaphorical meaning is that the person baptized belongs to Christ. Others argued that the phrase was Greek, but that its original provenance was magic. Abrahams and Jeremias argued for a Semitic origin.⁵⁶ They suggested that it expressed the intention of a cultic action. For example, in Gerim 1.7 it is said, 'Whoever is not a proselyte in the name of heaven is no proselyte.' In b. Yebamoth 45b and 47b it is said that slaves after becoming free are rebaptized in the name of freedom.

The variation in the wording of the phrase counts against Deissmann's thesis.⁵⁷ The variation could be explained by differing translations of a Semitic phrase. Whatever its origin, the meaning of the phrase in Acts 2:38 is to associate baptism with acceptance of the proclamation about Jesus. The reception of baptism becomes an outward sign of faith in God through Jesus. When John baptized, reception of that baptism implied

acceptance of his message of the wrath to come and of repentance. It further implied the recognition that the will of God was manifest in the preaching of John. When Jesus and his disciples baptized, reception of that baptism implied acceptance of the proclamation about the nearness of the kingdom of God. It is also implied recognition that the will of God was manifest in the teaching of Jesus. After the crucifixion and the appearances of the risen Lord, the followers of Jesus did not have the same direct authority that John and Jesus had. Reception of baptism at their hands implied acceptance first of all that there was a need for repentance in the face of the wrath to come or in preparation for the full manifestation of the kingdom of God. It also implied the recognition that the will of God was manifest in the death of Jesus and that God had raised him from the dead. The ritual of baptism for John, and probably for Jesus, was primarily an individual matter, although it took place in the context of the covenant people of God. But among the early Christians, because of the link of baptism with acceptance of what God had done with Jesus, the ritual became an initiation rite into a community. Acceptance of the proclamation about Jesus meant joining a group whose *raison d'être* was faith in Jesus as the mediator of salvation. The group was proselytizing, and the outsiders, those who refused to join, were those who did not accept Jesus' role as the primary mediator. Although the picture in Acts of the Christian community in Jerusalem is an idealized one, there is no reason to doubt that a new group identity formed early.

The other new element is the association of baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). In Acts 1:5 the prophecy of John the Baptist is alluded to, that the Coming One would baptize 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 3:16). The metaphorical fulfilment of that prophecy, with regard to the 120 or so followers of Jesus, is narrated in the beginning of Acts 2. Thereafter, the ritual of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter's sermon, however, does not quote John the Baptist. Instead, there is a pesher-like interpretation and application of Joel 3:1-5 (2:28-32 in the RSV). The prophecy of Joel that God would pour out the divine spirit on all humankind is explicitly declared to be fulfilled in the reception of the spirit by the band of Jesus' followers. In the Biblical tradition, the spirit of God rested only on certain charismatic individuals and on those appointed to a particular office, such as kings, prophets, and judges. The Joel prophecy looked forward to the day when the gift of the spirit would be democratized. The early Christians claimed that the day had come. Not only free men, but slaves and women now receive the spirit of God. The letters of Paul give evidence for

the early association of the gift of the spirit with baptism and for its universal character.⁵⁸

2. Variety in Interpretation

The early Christian community had a somewhat different eschatological schema than John the Baptist. They understood themselves to be farther along the eschatological trajectory because one human being had already been raised from the dead. For those associated with the risen Christ, that event meant for them a proleptic resurrection from the dead. The implication for baptism is that, as an expression of faith, it transforms human nature and makes possible in the present the living of a supra-human life. But in Acts' account of Christian beginnings and baptism in that context, the operative symbol is still cleansing.

The basic, fundamental meaning of the ritual of baptism as a washing, a cleansing from sin, originated with John the Baptist and continued to be expressed in early Christian writings on into the second century. It is present, as we have seen, in Acts 2. It was presupposed by Paul.⁵⁹ It is expressed in Ephesians⁶⁰ and in the Shepherd of Hermas.⁶¹

Other interpretations arose and developed alongside the original one. The notion of baptism as God's seal on Christians, authorizing, ratifying them and guaranteeing their protection, occurs in Paul's letters⁶² and in the deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians.⁶³ This interpretive image is also found in the Shepherd of Hermas.⁶⁴

As was suggested earlier, Christian baptism early on developed connotations of an initiation ritual, initiation into the community of those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, who believed that God had raised him from the dead. This sense is implied, as we have seen, by the phrase 'in the name of Jesus Christ' in the account of Acts 2 (v.38). It is also implied by the narrator's remark that 'there were added that day about three thousand souls' (v.41). The following comment, that 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (v.42), is an indication that 'adding souls' does not refer only to a heavenly tally of the 'saved' but to the growth of the Christian community. The notion of baptism as a ritual of initiation is implied also by Matt. 28:18-20. The command of the risen Lord associates baptism with 'making disciples' and 'teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'. Clearly one aspect of baptism here is initiation into the community of the disciples of Christ. The function of initiation is implicit in some of Paul's remarks on baptism also. In I Cor. 12:12-13, baptism is the means whereby Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people are joined into

one body. Similarly, according to Gal. 3:26-29, baptism overcomes distinctions between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women, and makes them all one in Christ. By the time of the deutero-Pauline Colossians, baptism's character as a ritual of initiation can be taken for granted to the extent that it can be presented as a new circumcision, a circumcision made without hands (2:11).

3. *Baptism as Death and Resurrection*

Two sayings attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic tradition seem to use the word baptism metaphorically to mean death, especially the death of Jesus.⁶⁵ In these sayings, the operative symbol has shifted from cleansing that leads to a pure and holy life to death that leads to new life. These sayings are close to Paul's interpretation of baptism in Romans 6, one of the most important passages on baptism in the New Testament.

Since the publication of Richard Reitzenstein's *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* in 1910, a debate has raged continually on the relation between Romans 6 and the Greco-Roman mystery-religions.⁶⁶ Reitzenstein argued that baptism had already been shaped by Hellenism in the pre-Pauline tradition. Paul did not therefore reinterpret baptism in the language of the mysteries. The similarity was already present. Paul himself, according to Reitzenstein, was familiar with the language of the mysteries. Thus his formulations of basic powerful images are informed by the mysteries and he borrowed particular terms from their traditional terminology.⁶⁷ Another leader of the history-of-religions school, Wilhelm Bousset, argued in more detail that Christian faith and ritual were already Hellenized in the tradition that Paul received. He suggested that the process began in the Christian community of Antioch in Syria.⁶⁸ In the foreword to his book, Bousset responded to the criticism that the Hellenistic texts cited by the historians of religion as analogues to Romans 6, for example, were later than the date of Romans by stressing that it was not a question of literary dependence. The history-of-religions school did not take the position that Paul had read the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or even Philo. Rather, they were concerned to show broad intellectual connections between certain forms of early Christianity and the Hellenistic mystery religions. They wanted to reconstruct and illustrate a form of piety that grew quite early in its own soil (the Hellenized ancient Near East) and later fused with the gospel of Christ. They did not assert that particular forms of Christian faith and ritual were dependent, for example, on the Mithraic cult, but that both made use of common, earlier ideas. Most of those who

have denied that Paul was dependent on the mystery religions missed the point that the history-of-religions school was making.⁶⁹

In Romans 6:1-14 the ritual of baptism is explicitly interpreted as a reenactment of the death and resurrection of Jesus in which the baptized person appropriates the significance of that death for him- or herself. In this understanding of the ritual, the experience of the Christian is firmly and vividly grounded in the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. These qualities of reenactment of a foundational story and the identification of the participant with the protagonist of the story are strikingly reminiscent of what is known about the initiation rituals of certain mystery religions, notably the Eleusinian mysteries and the Isis mysteries.⁷⁰

One of the distinctive features of Romans 6 is that Paul avoids saying 'we have risen' with Christ; rather he speaks of 'newness of life'. The implication of Paul's restraint is that the transformation is not complete. There is still an apocalyptic expectation of a future, fuller transformation into a heavenly form of life. This expectation fits with Paul's use throughout the passage of the imperative alongside the indicative. 'Newness of life' is a real, present possibility, both spiritually and ethically, but the actualizing of that possibility requires decision and commitment as well as grace.⁷¹

At some point, at least forty years after Paul's death, the notion of death and rebirth was also attached to proselyte baptism in Judaism. Two passages in the Babylonian Talmud mention the opinion that one who became a proselyte is like a child newly born.⁷² The rebirth of the rabbinic proselyte baptism, unlike the Christian form, was not eschatological. No direct link to immortality was made. As Israel Abrahams put it, proselyte baptism did not ensure sinlessness nor the transformation of human character. Such, according to the rabbis, was not possible in the pre-messianic age.⁷³ The image of rebirth thus shows the gulf between life within and life outside the covenant people.

Christian and rabbinic baptism both have their ultimate roots in the ritual washings of Leviticus. Both came to function as rituals of initiation. The major difference is the relation of this ritual to eschatology. Both expect a fulfilment but the two communities place themselves on different sides of the turning point between the two ages.

NOTES

1. See most recently Hendrikus Boers, *Who Was Jesus?*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, forthcoming.

2. Translations of passages from the New Testament are taken from Revised Standard Version.
3. Other, less reliable, sources are Justin Martyr, *The Book or Protoevangelium of James* (2nd century C.E.) and other infancy gospels dependent on it, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, the Gospel of the Ebionites (whose tradition may go back to the second century) as cited by Epiphanius (4th century), the Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate (4th or early 5th century), the Clementine Homilies and Recognitions (3rd century), the Mandaeen literature (8th century), and the Slavonic manuscripts of Josephus' *Jewish War* (15-16th century). On the Christian apocryphal works, see E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols., Philadelphia 1963 and 1965; on the Mandaean literature see Charles Scobie, *John the Baptist*, Philadelphia 1964, 23-31.
4. Josephus, *Ant.* 18. 116-119; translation cited is by Louis H. Feldman in *Josephus*, Cambridge, MA 1965, 9. 81, 83.
5. Although Bo Reicke mentions the fact that the baptism of John was eschatological, he also minimizes this characteristic, in order to fit John and Jesus into a theological framework of Law and Gospel ('The Historical Setting of John's Baptism' in E. P. Sanders, ed., *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church: Essays in Honor of William R. Farmer*, Macon, GA 1987, 209-24).
6. Acts 1:5, 11:16, 18:25, 19:1-7.
7. See further Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, Cambridge 1968.
8. This saying has been preserved in Matt. 3:11 and Luke 3:16.
9. Albert Schweitzer argued that John the Baptist considered himself to be the forerunner of the forerunner, Elijah (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, New York 1931, 162-3, 231).
10. Translation cited is by Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2nd edn, New York 1975, 77; emphasis added.
11. See John J. Collins, 'The Sibylline Oracles' in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Garden City 1983, 1.381-82.
12. *Sib. Or.* 4. 152-174; translation cited by John J. Collins, *ibid.*, 388.
13. W. H. Brownlee, 'John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls' in Krister Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, New York 1957; see J. Gnilka, 'Die essenischen Tauchbäder und die Johannestaufe' in *Revue de Qumran* 3 (1961-62) 185-207 for a discussion of this issue and further bibliography.
14. Otto Betz, 'Die Proselytentaufe der Qumransekte und die Taufe im Neuen Testament' in *Revue de Qumran* 1 (1958) 213-34, especially 216-17.
15. IQS 5:7-15; the paraphrase given above is based on Vermes' translation, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 79; this is Brownlee's argument (see note 13).
16. At some point, immersion became also a symbol of higher purification and consecration. See the remark that 'None may enter the Temple Court for [an act of the Temple-] Service, even though he is clean, until he has immersed himself. On this day the High Priest five times immerses himself and ten times he sanctifies [his hands and his feet], each time, excepting this alone, in the Temple by the Parwah Chamber' in the Mishnaic tractate Yoma 3.3. 'This day' is, of course, Yom Kippur (the translation cited is by Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah*, London 1933, 164). On this point, see L. Finkelstein, 'The Institution of Baptism for Proselytes' in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 (1933) 205-6. See also *idem*, 'Some examples of the Maccabean Halaka' in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 49 (1930) 37-8. This new understanding may have been operative already in the higher ablutions at Qumran.
17. According to Acts 21:38 a charismatic leader called simply 'the Egyptian' assembled a large following in the desert; Josephus calls him a false prophet and says that he led his followers from the desert to the Mount of Olives, proposing to take Jerusalem by force (*J. W.* 2.261-63; cf. *Ant.* 20. 169-70 where Josephus says that he promised to make the walls of the city collapse). Bannos, Josephus' teacher for three years, lived in the desert and practised frequent ablutions in cold water, by day and night; he was also ascetic, wearing only

- what the trees provided and eating only things which grew of themselves (Josephus, *Vita* 11). Eschatology was apparently widespread at this time (see, e.g., the Psalms of Solomon and the Assumption or Testament of Moses). Total immersion had long been practised by priests and other Jews for purification and at this time the ritual was becoming more common.
18. On John the Baptist as a prophet, see Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus*, Minneapolis 1985, 175-81.
 19. J. Leipoldt and Robert Eisler argued along these lines; see the discussion in Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 101 and n. 1.
 20. Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, Jerusalem 1977, 146-89.
 21. Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospel*. 1st series, Cambridge 1917 = New York 1967, 30-46; H. H. Rowley, 'Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John' in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 15 (1940) 313-34; Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, Philadelphia 1960; Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?* Hoboken, NJ 1985. T. F. Torrance also takes this position: 'Proselyte Baptism' in *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954) 150-4.
 22. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 25-28; quotation is from p. 26, emphasis added. The emphasized phrase (*katharizontes autas katharismō paranomō* in the Greek manuscripts) was excluded from the critical edition by Robert Henry Charles (*The Greek Versions of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Oxford 1908 = Hildesheim 1960, 57) and thus from the translation by Howard C. Kee (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1. 793). The reading is present, however, in most of the older manuscripts and is included in the critical edition of M. de Jonge (*The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text*, Leiden 1978, 42).
 23. Mishnah Pesahim 8.8 and Eduyoth 5.2; B. J. Pesahim 92a; Tosefta Pesahim 7.13.
 24. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?*, 29.
 25. *Ibid.*, 26, 29.
 26. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 95-102; S. Zeitlin, 'The Halaka in the Gospels and its Relation to the Jewish Law in the Time of Jesus' in *The Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924) 357-63 and 'A Note on Baptism for Proselytes' in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 (1933) 78-9.
 27. A. Büchler, 'The Levitical Impurity of the Gentile in Palestine Before the Year 70' in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 17 (1926/27) 1-81; Schiffman, *Who Was A Jew?*, 26, 85 n. 44.
 28. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257-58, 318-19.
 29. See the discussion by Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 98.
 30. Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, New York 1969, 110-11.
 31. See the discussion in Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 99.
 32. Text, translation, and notes are given by Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Jerusalem 1976, 1.542-4.
 33. Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 99 n. 2.
 34. Schweitzer believed that the prophetic tradition alone, along with John's eschatological orientation, was sufficient to explain the origin of John's baptism (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 231-2).
 35. Translations from the Tanakh/Old Testament are according to the Revised Standard Version.
 36. John's activity of baptizing calls into question his identification as an 'oracular prophet' rather than 'action prophet', by Horsley and Hanson; see note 18 above.
 37. Matt. 11:9-19// Luke 7:26-35; Mark 11:27-33// Matt. 21:23-27// Luke 20:1-8; Matt. 21:32.
 38. See, for example, Boers, *Who Was Jesus?*
 39. The point is explicit in Mark 1:14 and Matt. 4:12-17; it is implicit in Luke 3:18-23.
 40. Baptizing is not one of the activities enjoined by Jesus on the disciples during his earthly life; see Mark 3:13-19, 6:7-13; Matt. 10:1-15; Luke 9:1-6, 10:1-12. It is only after the

- resurrection, according to Matthew, that the command to baptize was given: 28:16-20.
41. John 3:22-30, 4:1-3.
 42. John 3:22, 26; 4:1.
 43. John 4:2.
 44. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Philadelphia 1971, 167.
 45. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, Garden City 1966, 155.
 46. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, London 1962 = 1972.
 47. This is the position taken by Schweitzer (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 233-4).
 48. This essential continuity was recognized by Schweitzer (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 236).
 49. Cf. Acts 2:38 with Mark 1:4; Matt. 3:2, 11.
 50. Cf. Acts 2:38 with Mark 1:4 and Matt. 3:6.
 51. Acts 3:40-41.
 52. Matt. 3:10, 12.
 53. Cf. I Cor. 3:15.
 54. Cf. I Cor. 1:13, 15; Matt. 28:19.
 55. Albrecht Oepke, 'Baptō, Baptizō' in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1 (1964) 539 and n. 51.
 56. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*; Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*; cf. Billerbeck 1. 1054-55; 4. 744.
 57. In Acts 10:48 it is *en tō onomati*; in Acts 2:38, as noted above, it is *epi tō onomati*.
 58. I Cor. 6:11, 12:13; Gal. 3:27-29.
 59. See I Cor. 6:9-11; I Cor. 15:29 presupposes that baptism is a kind of expiation for sin; cf. II Macc. 12:39-45. See also the speech attributed to Paul in Acts 22, especially v.16.
 60. Eph. 5:25-27.
 61. Hermas, *Mandates* 4.3.1.
 62. II Cor. 1:21-22; cf. Rom. 4:11.
 63. Eph 1:13-14; 4:30.
 64. Hermas, *Similitudes* 9.16.1-4.
 65. Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50.
 66. The third edition was published in 1927; see now the English translation by J. E. Steely, Pittsburgh 1978.
 67. J. H. Randall (*Hellenistic Ways of Deliverance and the Making of the Christian Synthesis*, New York 1970) and Joscelyn Godwin (*Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, New York 1981) have also concluded that Paul was influenced by the mystery religions.
 68. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. J. E. Steely, Nashville 1970. Ernst Käsemann (*Commentary on Romans*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids 1980) and Robert C. Tannehill (*Dying and Rising with Christ*, Berlin 1967) also conclude that Hellenization took place prior to Paul.
 69. Those who have argued against the influence of the mystery religions on Paul include Arthur Darby Nock, 'Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background' in A. E. J. Rawlinson (ed.), *Essays on the Trinity and Incarnation*, London 1928, 51-156; idem, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* New York 1964, 109-45; Günter Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries: The Problem of the Pauline Doctrine of Baptism in Romans VI.1-11, In the Light of Religio-Historical 'Parallels'*, trans. J. P. Smith, Edinburgh 1967; and Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World*, Grand Rapids 1984, 115-59.
 70. For the story or *hieros logos* of the Eleusinian mysteries, see the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. An English translation of this hymn, along with an introduction and bibliography, has been published by Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, New York 1987, 17-30. For an account of an initiation into the mysteries of Isis, see Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Book 11. See also Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*. Meyer has included book 11

of the Golden Ass and selections from Plutarch's work (ibid., 176-93 and 160-72)..

71. Note that the author of Colossians does not hesitate to say that Christians have risen with Christ (2:12, 3:1). Baptism is also linked to the resurrection of Christ in 1 Peter 3:21. See also the related interpretation of baptism as rebirth in John 3:3-8 and Titus 3:5.
72. Yebamoth 62a; Bekoroth 47a; see George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, Cambridge, MA 1927 = New York 1971, 1.334-5. See also Yebamoth 48b, M. Kerithoth 8b, Tos. Shekalim 3:20, Gerim 2.5; Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 33 n. 8; Rowley, 'Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John', 329.
73. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 42; in support of his point, he cites Gen. Rab. 70.8, b. Qiddushin 30b, and Midr. Tanhuma, Mesora 17-18.